



Still cozy after all these years

The Elmgrove Gardens neighborhood, on the East Side, is named a national historic place.

01:00 AM EDT on Tuesday, May 31, 2005

PROVIDENCE -- The Elmgrove Gardens Historic District, which covers only four blocks on the East Side, has been added to the National Register of Historic Places.

The state Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, in announcing the designation by the National Park Service, described the area as "a well-preserved example of an early 20th-century residential suburb."

The district -- bounded by Rochambeau Avenue, Cole Avenue, Woodbury Street, and Morris Avenue -- includes 141 primarily single-family houses in an eclectic mix of styles, including Colonial Revival, Dutch Colonial, and Tudor Revival. The Engine 4 Fire Station, on Rochambeau Avenue, is in the Tudor Revival style.

The state Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission gave the following description of the neighborhood's history:

"Platted between 1887 and 1928, the district's layout of streets and house lots reflects a transition from the era of the public streetcar to the automobile age. The district is also distinctive for being platted mostly by the same extended family that had owned and farmed the land for nearly two centuries. . . .

"The district's rectilinear street plan and compact house lots indicate that it was originally planned to offer easy walking to public streetcars, but many homes have period garages, demonstrating the rise of the automobile in the 1920s and 1930s.

"Since the end of World War II, the district has retained all but one of its original buildings, and has seen very little new construction.

"During the Colonial era, this part of Providence was accessible by only four public routes, including Hearnton's Lane (now Rochambeau Avenue). The primary use of the land was agriculture, with a few scattered farmsteads. Phebe Brown, whose family had owned property in the area since the 17th century, built a house in 1745.

"The Phebe and Phineas Brown House, at 287 Rochambeau Ave., and their son's house, the circa 1793 Morris Brown House at 317 Rochambeau, are the oldest surviving buildings in the historic district.

"In 1856, Hearnton's Lane was renamed North Street to recognize its status as a boundary between Providence and North Providence. With the city's population surging, Providence annexed a large portion of North Providence in 1874 and extended the city's northern border from North Street to the present Pawtucket city line. Almost immediately, some property owners began to survey their open agricultural lands for residential subdivisions.

"Phebe Brown's 18th-century farm was still relatively intact by 1875. Approximately 80 percent of the land belonged to family members, and most of it was still in agricultural use. In 1887, Phebe Brown's great-great-grandson Albert M. Smith recorded a plat of 23 house lots east of Morris Avenue and south of North Street. The Smith Plat introduced two new streets, Fosdyke and Woodbury.

"The majority of house lots in the Smith Plat contained about 4,500 square feet, typical of a 'streetcar suburb' of the late 19th century (despite the fact that streetcar service was not yet available in the vicinity of this plat).

"Between 1875 and 1914, several more residential plats were recorded, but development proceeded at a slow pace. By 1907, only five houses stood within the Smith Plat, and seven houses stood on its fringes, all on Morris and Rochambeau avenues.

"The arrival of streetcar service on Hope Street, and new water and sewer lines on Morris and Rochambeau, sparked a local building boom in the early 20th century. Of the district's 142 buildings, 13 went up between 1908 and 1918; 47 went up between 1918 and 1926, and another 53 between 1927 and 1937. Development progressed from west to east. In 1927, Phebe Brown's descendants recorded the last plat in the district, the Elmgrove Gardens Plat.

"Two years later, the City built the brick and half-timber Tudor Revival-style Engine 4 Station to serve the growing neighborhood. By 1950, only one vacant lot remained and almost all of the house lots had garages standing on them, many designed with materials and features copied from the main house."

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register results in consideration during the planning of federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for federal and state tax benefits for historic rehabilitation projects, the preservation commission said.